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In September 2007, 8 Chittenden County School Districts together with partners HowardCenter and Department of Children and Families – Family Services Division were awarded \$330,000 from the Federal Department of Education to fund the Students FIRST Project.

Students FIRST is an 18 month project (extending until June 2008) that focuses on building the capacity of Chittenden County and its schools for mental health promotion, prevention, early detection, early intervention, and mental health treatment by creating innovative linkages between school systems and mental health systems in Chittenden County. Funding cannot be used for direct service, but instead will focus on collaborative planning, training/technical assistance, and developing systems to link students and families with appropriate resources and services.

In the initial phase, the Students FIRST Project developed a framework, based on extensive input from schools and their community partners, that identifies school and community components necessary for schools to effectively promote the mental health of all students, identify students who may be at risk for or developing mental health issues, and address the needs of students who are struggling with social, emotional, behavioral, or substance abuse issues.

From these identified elements, the Students FIRST Project is developing and will conduct an assessment of existing resources and gaps related to the integration of mental health and education. The information gained through this assessment will be used, in part, by partners from state and local education, mental health, and juvenile justice, along with parent advocacy, higher education, primary care, psychiatry, and cultural liaison representatives to develop a county wide strategic plan to begin to address identified gaps in Chittenden County.

In addition, the Students FIRST Project is supporting mental health related training and technical assistance in Chittenden County schools. Chittenden County Schools were surveyed to identify areas of training needs. In response, a number of curricula are being developed and many mental health related trainings are being provided for schools across the county. In addition, through the work of a number of committees, Students FIRST is reviewing research and making county wide recommendations about best practices in a number of areas unique to the integration of mental health and education, including the use of mental health screenings in schools, cultural competence related to schools and mental health, family involvement, and core competencies for school personnel related to the integration of mental health and education.

In addition, to support schools to link with quality mental health information and resources, Students FIRST is developing a county specific website focusing on information and resources that can assist schools in promoting the mental health of all students, identifying students with needs early, and intervening quickly and effectively when issues arise.

All activities of the Students FIRST Project will flow from "The Pyramid" in the center of the diagram below.

